

The Romance of Terror

People don't become terrorists because they are poor or uneducated, schooled in radical religion or brainwashed

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Especially for young men, mortal combat in the service of a great cause provides the ultimate adventure and maximum esteem in the eyes of many and, most dearly, in the hearts of their peers. One heroic cause for disaffected souls in the world today is jihad, through which anyone from anywhere can make a mark against the most powerful countries and armies in the history of the world. How glorious to cut off Goliath's head with a box cutter – or at least cause him a big headache.

Yet, although many millions of people express sympathy with al-Qaida's viral social movement or other forms of violent political expression that abuse [religion](#) and support terrorism, relatively few willingly use violence. Following a 2001-2007 survey of 35 predominantly Muslim nations, a [Gallup study](#) estimated that 7% of the world's 1.3 billion Muslims thought that the 9/11 attacks were "completely justified". That's about 100 million people; however, of these many millions who express support for violence against the [outgroup](#), there are only thousands willing to actually commit violence.

This is also true in the Muslim diaspora, which provides the overwhelming majority of al-Qaida followers. In the European Union, fewer than 3,000 suspects have been imprisoned for jihadi activities out of a Muslim population of perhaps 20 million. In the United States, fewer than 500 suspects have been arrested for having anything remotely to do with support for holy war against America after 9/11, with less than 100 cases being considered serious out of an immigrant Muslim population of more than two million.

If so many millions support jihad, why are only relatively few willing to kill and die for it? Although heroic action for a great cause is the ultimate end, the path to violent extremism is mostly a matter of individual motivations and small group dynamics in specific historical contexts. Those who go on to violence generally do so by way of family and friends within specific "scenes": neighbourhoods, schools (classes, dorms), workplaces, common leisure activities (soccer, barbershop, café), and, increasingly, online chat rooms.

The process of self selection into violence within these scenes is stimulated by a massive, media-driven political awakening in which jihad is represented as the only the way to permanently resolve glaring problems of global injustice. When this perceived injustice resonates with frustrated personal aspirations, violence may be seen as a way out. Al-Qaida and its associates do not so much recruit as attract and enlist those disaffected people who have already decided to embark on the path to violent extremism with the help of a few fellow travellers.

Research shows that terrorists generally don't commit terrorism because they are extraordinarily vengeful or uncaring, poor or uneducated, schooled as children in radical religion or brainwashed, criminally-minded or suicidal, or sex-starved for virgins in heaven. Most have no personal history of violent emotions and generally peaceful in their daily lives but become "born again" into a radical cause.

Before and just after 9/11, jihadis, including suicide bombers, were on average materially better-off and better-educated relative to their populations of origin. Many had college educations or advanced technical training. A background in science, particularly engineering and medicine, was positively associated with the likelihood of joining jihad. Now, the main threat to the west isn't from any organisation, or from well-trained cadres of volunteers, but from an al-Qaida-inspired viral social movement that is particularly contagious among young adults who are in transition stages in their lives: immigrants, students, those still in search of friends, mates or jobs.

The popular notion of a "clash of civilizations" is woefully misleading. Violent extremism represents the collapse of traditional territorial cultures, not their resurgence, as people unmoored from millennial traditions flail about in search of a social identity. Individuals now mostly radicalise horizontally with their peers, rather than vertically through institutional leaders or organisational hierarchies: in small groups of friends – from the same neighbourhood or social network – or even as loners who find common cause with a virtual internet community. Appeals to moderate [Islam](#) are about as irrelevant as older people appealing to adolescents to moderate their music or clothes.

In the long run, perhaps the most important counterterrorism measure of all is to provide alternative heroes and hopes that are more enticing and empowering than any moral lessons or material offerings (jobs that help to relieve the terrible boredom and inactivity of immigrant youth in Europe and the underemployed throughout much of the Muslim world, will not alone offset the allure of playing at war). It is also important to provide alternate local networks and chatrooms that speak to the inherent idealism, sense of risk and adventure, and need for peer approval that young people everywhere tend toward. It could even be a 21st-century version of what the Boy Scouts and high school football teams did for immigrants and potentially troublesome youth as America urbanised a century ago. Ask any cop on the beat: those things work. It has to be done with the input and insight of local communities, and chiefly peer-to-peer, or it won't be effective: deradicalisation, like radicalisation itself, works mainly from the bottom up, not from the top down. This, of course, is not how you stop terrorism today, but how you do it for tomorrow.